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GLORIA MOLINA HONORS FOSTER YOUTH FOR IMPROVED GRADUATION RATES, COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

Higher GPAs, Lower Drop-Out Rates via Molina's Educational Pilot Project

LOS ANGELES (July 7, 2009)—Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina honored 80 foster youth today for participating in the First District Education Pilot Project, which was launched in the Spring of 2008 to improve the graduation and college entry rates among the county's foster youth population. Of the 80 participating students, 19 graduated high school in June and all but four are going to two-year or four-year colleges. All students were enrolled in either the Montebello or the Pomona Unified School Districts.

"Foster care placement can be one of the most distressing events in the life of a child, especially since he or she often is forced to change schools—sometimes repeatedly—during the course of their placement," Molina said. "Addressing educational issues is a struggle for county staff as well, who must keep track of which schools foster youth attend, assess where each child stands educationally, develop a solid plan to address all their needs, and then persistently monitor that plan's implementation. Frankly, this has been as struggle at the county for years. But thanks to successful collaboration between county departments, the school districts, non-profit organizations, and family court officials, we found a way to overcome these obstacles. Now more foster youth are staying in school, and even pursuing higher education, as a result."

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Key to the success of the pilot project is the cross-referencing and data-matching required to keep track of which students are participating in the program; all the schools they formerly attended; and what coursework they completed since transferring from school to school frequently causes students to lose credit for courses they actually finished. This credit drop, in turn, contributes to lower graduation rates. In fact, in just one year, pilot project staff recovered 300 credits—and 62 percent of all participating students dramatically improved their overall grade point averages after the program's implementation.

Sixty-one high school students remain in the program now that 19 participants graduated in June. Starting this September, the county will expand the pilot project to include youth from the El Monte, Hacienda La Puente, and Bassett Unified School Districts.

In addition to Molina's office, pilot project participants include the county's Chief Executive Office, Dept. of Children & Family Services, and Education Coordinating Council as well as Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Michael Nash (who presides as supervising judge of the Dependency Court) and Casey Family Programs. Participating staff from these agencies were honored at today's meeting of the county Board of Supervisors, as were Edward Velasquez—who serves as Montebello Unified School District superintendent—and Richard Martinez, the assistant superintendent of the Pomona Unified School District.

"Because of our pilot project, county staff, school districts, and caregivers now have a better understanding of how to navigate the educational system, and I'm proud of the work we've done," Molina said. "But I'm particularly proud of the students because many of them had just sort of given up. Many of them thought this is just the way the system works. But I think they, too, were inspired and motivated by the caregivers, by the social workers, by the counselors, and all the people that were involved."

One graduating student, Jeanette Rios, affirmed this sentiment.

“This program has personally helped me obtain credits to receive my high school diploma,” Rios said. “I have graduated with my class and I was behind. I didn’t think that was possible. The most important thing I learned is that I can reach everything I believe in. I also got an internship through the R.O.P. program, which helped me get hands-on training through Wells Fargo at a banking program.”

Rios added that the program “helped me realize that my dreams have become reality. From the dream that I hoped, I discovered my talent in writing. Through the encouragement of staff members from this program, I have decided to major in English. I want to thank everybody here for helping this come together.”

At today’s board meeting, Trish Ploehn—director of the county’s Dept. of Children and Family Services—described how the program impacted her staff.

“Since this inception of this First District Educational Pilot, my staff, my managers, really got the opportunity to feel the importance of what it is to treat the whole child,” Ploehn said. “At the department, it has always been our responsibility to ensure a child’s safety. And that’s very important. But safety is just one piece of what a child needs. A child needs permanent families. A child needs a sense of belonging. A child needs self-esteem and self-respect. And that’s what education gives them.”

Molina concluded today’s ceremony by expressing her desire to some day expand the program to all children in the county’s care.

“We hope that eventually this is a program that is going to be available to every single foster care child that is with us because they deserve it,” Molina said. “As you can see, these are bright, talented, wonderful young people. And we need to do all we can to give them that boost that they need toward their independence, to really create an emancipation that will truly make them the future leaders we want to see.”

(Pictures from today’s reception and board presentation are available upon request.)

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